

Transmedial Tevye: Adapting *Tevye the Dairyman*

Fiddler on the Roof is an iconic piece of American Jewish media. It is also an American classic. Opening on Broadway in 1964 and being adapted into film in 1971, the musical and its main character Tevye, have become a staple of high school theatres, inspired new cross-cultural adaptations, and become an important cultural touchpoint for Jewish people (Solomon, 2013). The musical's roots are well documented, and oft studied. The argumentative and lovable *Tevye the Dairyman* emerged from the deft hand of Sholem Aleichem in a series of seven short stories told over a period of seventeen years. *Tevye the Dairyman* was written in these small pieces, in Yiddish, for a mass audience in Eastern Europe and other Yiddish speaking centres, like New York City (Halkin, 1996). When the text was eventually adapted, first as a play, and then as a film, and eventually as the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, it underwent significant changes. Using Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* as a jumping off point, I am going to analyze how adaptations of *Tevye the Dairyman* appealed to their new audiences. Though adaptors, including Sholem Aleichem himself, changed themes, characters, and mediums, they also used a recognized storyworld to accomplish new goals.

I am going to focus primarily on the delivery of the story, which changes its mode of engagement from Telling to Showing. This happened as Tevye's travails were adapted from the page, to theatre and films. Tevye himself had to change. Unable to use his patented monologues to tell his story onstage, he was forced to show his life to the audience, and eventually, to break the fourth wall and explain it in song. These changes reflect the work of writers and adapters to understand their audience and find a

medium which would best engage them. They also give a sense of the malleability of the Tevye storyworld, which can function as a myth, a warning, and a political analysis, depending on who it is aimed at.

Situating and clarifying

I have decided to spell Sholem Aleichem the conventional way, rather than opt for the Yiddish Scientific Institute's standardized transliteration practices. I made this choice because I feel it is the most readable way to write his name.

Before I continue, I want to situate myself and give some context for this essay. I am a Jewish Canadian man with a distinct interest in Eastern European Jewish life. I have come to this topic because I had never seen *Fiddler on the Roof* or read *Tevye the Dairyman*, two of the most well-known works in the modern Jewish canon. I felt somewhat like Homer Simpson, who, in an episode of the Simpsons, attempts to justify his Jewishness to a rabbi by saying "Now, I know I haven't been the best Jew...but I have rented *Fiddler on the Roof* and I intend to watch it" (Solomon, 2013). I think that engaging with this storyworld has helped me better understand my own place as a Jewish person in North America. The massive body of scholarship on it has also illuminated for me the major issues with mass immigration to New York, the fragile power of the Yiddish Theatre, the dread of the Jewish intelligentsia on the eve of the Holocaust, and so much more. I am glad to have undertaken this project and expanded my knowledge of an important Jewish storyworld.

Tevye becoming Tevye

Though Tevye is now important part of American Jewish culture, Sholem Aleichem once struggled to gain purchase for his works in America. When he first immigrated, the renowned author wrote and staged two plays, *Pasternak* and *Stempenyu* (Solomon, 2013). Both plays opened on the same night at competing theatres, and despite packed houses, they received very negative reactions from the Yiddish press (Solomon, 2013). Less than a year after immigrating to New York, Sholem Aleichem gave up on American theatre and returned to Europe (Solomon, 2013). Back across the Atlantic, he completed *Tevye the Dairyman*, compiled it, and dramatized it (Solomon, 2013). Instead of shipping the play to New York, he decided to “spare himself the humiliation” of seeing *Tevye the Dairyman* fail (Solomon, 2013). Though Sholem Aleichem eventually returned to New York, he never got to see Tevye on stage. The play was picked up by Maurice Schwartz, the prince of Yiddish theatre, and produced for “a colossal creative and commercial triumph” (Solomon, 2013). Schwartz’s adaptation made use of Sholem Aleichem’s script which, crucially, forwent Tevye’s penchant for monologues. This new form was wildly successful, propelling Schwartz’s career and leading to a film adaptation, *Tevye*, in 1939.

From Telling to Showing to Showing again

One of the defining features of Sholem Aleichem’s text is its genre. The stories are constructed as long, individual monologues. During these monologues, Tevye explains the difficulties of his life. He does so to Sholem Aleichem himself, in tragicomic form, whenever the writer is in town (Halkin, 1996). The Sholem Aleichem character then repeats to his audience exactly what Tevye told him. Of course, *Tevye the Dairyman* is a work of fiction and Sholem Aleichem was writing these monologues on his own. When

Tevye the Dairyman was adapted for the stage and screen, this direct telling of the story, and the presence of Sholem Aleichem in it, were removed. These adaptations moved the Tevye storyworld into a new mode of engagement. Modes of engagement describe the ways that a narrative engages its audience (Hutcheon, 2013). The modes cover the spectrum from “Interacting”, to “Showing” and “Telling” (Hutcheon, 2013).

The *Tevye the Dairyman* stories use a Telling mode of engagement. Though “no one mode is inherently good at doing one thing and not another,” Tevye’s monologues are well suited for Telling (Hutcheon, 2013). Because of them, Tevye acts as both main character, and as narrator. Since Tevye is in conversation with the Sholem Aleichem character, everything in *Tevye the Dairyman* is coloured by their relationship. Sholem Aleichem “frames the story and mediates between the loquacious Tevye and the reader” (Wolitz, 1988). Seth Wolitz explains the place of Sholem Aleichem in his essay, “The Americanization of Tevye: Boarding the Jewish Mayflower” when he says that

Intimacy is quickly established by placing the author [Aleichem] as silent participant on an equal footing with the hero, who feels free to talk directly and intimately (Wolitz, 1988).

The author and his provincial friend treat each other as equals, giving Tevye the space to fully express himself. This explains why, in the second last chapter of *Tevye the Dairyman*, Tevye is relieved to hear that Sholem Aleichem has not emigrated to America. Tevye thinks this is a bad idea, deciding instead to emigrate to the Land of Israel. In a chance run-in with Aleichem on the train, he remarks “Since when would someone like Sholem Aleichem go do a dumb thing like that? He’s an intelligent man, after all, if nothing else...” (Aleichem, 1996). These interactions between Tevye and

Sholem Aleichem give readers a chance to understand how the main character views the decisions of other Jews in Eastern Europe. They portray Tevye as a well-meaning critic who wants the best for those who treat him with respect. Along with the monologue genre's relationship between Tevye and Sholem Aleichem, there exists a relationship between Tevye and the audience. The stories are being told to readers in first person. This amplifies the closeness of the Telling mode of engagement, bringing readers the same intimacy that is granted to the author.

In the storyworld's stage and film adaptations, the mode of engagement is changes to Showing. This means that for American audiences, the relationship between Aleichem and Tevye disappears. In fact, Sholem Aleichem decided to cut his own character out of the story when he initially dramatized *Tevye the Dairyman* for the stage. In her book, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof*, Alisa Solomon explains that Aleichem "didn't seem to worry that a change ...would alter the way his protagonist frames his own experiences as stories" (Solomon, 2013). In the play, Tevye would become a character in his stories, rather than the narrator trying to impress his respected and intelligent interlocutor. Maurice Schwartz turned this new Tevye into a massive success. This was the first time that *Tevye the Dairyman* was adapted, and it struck a chord with audiences and critics. This new venture into the storyworld was not without its detractors, however, who suggested that by moving to the stage and leaving behind the Telling mode of engagement, the stories would lose their dynamism (Solomon, 2013). What Maurice Schwartz was able to do with Tevye was infuse him with a new dynamism. He exemplified a "new approach to acting" by bringing "a surprising sense of wisdom as well as playful charm" to the Yiddish stage (Solomon,

2013). Audiences were no longer interested in reading well-worn stories of the old country, they wanted to see them earnestly performed. Sholem Aleichem made this realization while writing his script and emphasized Tevye's religious observance more than in the adapted text of *Tevye the Dairyman*. This was used to explain Tevye's deep, folksy, but still questioning relationship with religion, in the play. Since audiences didn't have access to the complexity of Tevye's thoughts, he became more of a stylized and "archetypal folk Jew who maintained his customs in the face of adversity" (Wolitz, 1988). The positive reaction to these changes proved that a new mode of engagement, and an adaptation of the main character for his new audiences, was able to revitalize interest in Tevye's stories.

In 1939, Maurice Schwartz continued his successful run as the dairyman, starring and directing in a film adaptation of the play called *Tevye*. The film is "one of the only few relatively known Yiddish talkies" and received a positive reception. According to scholar Seth Wolitz, Schwartz "faithfully reworked the Sholem Aleichem play into a film" (Wolitz, 1988). In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon critiques this mode of thinking, which is called 'fidelity criticism' (Hutcheon, 2013). She insists that it is important to consider which particular elements of the story are being adapted, from the characters and setting, to the introduction and themes (Hutcheon, 2013).

Jewish Studies scholar Marat Grinberg has debunked the myth of *Tevye's* fidelity to its source material. She claims that "*Tevye* is both a deliberate (mis)translation of its sources and [a] film in equivocal and uneasy dialogue with its epoch" (Grinberg, 2014). Contemporary critics, however, used the language of fidelity to judge the film. Grinberg quotes a critic who said that *Tevye* "does not at all agree with the spirit and essence of

Sholem Aleichem's writing" (Grinberg, 2014). This raises an interesting question about the nature of putting Tevye on film, since "the script hewed closely to [Sholem Aleichem]'s text" (Grinberg, 2014). How could there be such a drastic change in the reception of the same script? The answer lies in external factors, including the dates of shooting, which fell after Hitler seized Danzig for the Nazi Reich (Grinberg, 2014). The climate of "anxiety and horror that gripped American Jews" left Maurice Schwartz with a clear message with which to imbue his film: the antisemitism of Europe. To add new sparks of antisemitism into the play, Schwartz adapted a new opening scene, where a group of Ukranian gentiles accost Tevye's daughter Khava (*Tevye*, 1939). Schwartz also adapts the conclusion, using a shot of Tevye's wagon leaving for the Land of Israel with his family. Alisa Solomon notes that this shot was deemed "'a triumphant rebuke' to the assimilationist fables proffered by most popular Yiddish movies" (Solomon, 2013). Grinberg sees these adaptations, which add characters and scenes, as essential to Maurice Schwartz's message. He was

not merely revisiting, but also rethinking his Tevye project to imbue it fundamentally with new meanings and anxieties. It is undoubtedly cinema's appeal to large, varied audiences and the medium's visual possibilities that specifically attracted him.

Schwartz seems to have acted consciously to turn Sholem Aleichem's play into a film that could stand as a warning for the imperialistic antisemitism of the Nazi Reich.

Sholem Aleichem's work was deeply intertwined with political realities in and around the Jewish world during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He wrote sensitively about the upheaval of the time, which stemmed from sources as disparate as enlightenment secularism, emigration, antisemitism, revolution, and nationalism.

Schwartz adapted the storyworld to fit the needs of its new audience, to warn them about the climate in Europe. As one reviewer said of *Tevye* in 1939, “There sits upon Tevye’s shoulders the great resignation which is the birthright of his people” (Solomon, 2013). Though Tevye has always been a Job-like figure, dealing with changes that rip his family apart, he was not resigned to his fate in *Tevye the Dairyman*. In *Tevye* however, Tevye has less of a chance to explain his rebellion to God’s plan in his monologues, and was portrayed by Schwartz as a resigned, European (that is, non-American) Jew. According to Seth Wolitz, “neither Sholem Aleichem nor Maurice Schwartz conceived that Tevye might become a cultural hero to the immigrant masses” (Wolitz, 1988). They both saw him as a representative of the old country, not as a potential immigrant to America. In *Tevye the Dairyman* and *Tevye*, Tevye decides he should emigrate to the Land of Israel, not to America. Tevye becomes American only when the story is adapted once again, for entirely new purposes, in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Fiddler on the Roof represented the most major adaptation of the Tevye stories, and also provides them with the most significant changes. It was first conceived in 1961, more than twenty years after the release of *Tevye*, and opened in 1964. *Fiddler* would go on to run 3,242 shows, win nine Tony Awards, and get adapted into a film of the same name. The mode of engagement remained Showing, both in its stage and film iterations. The biggest change was in its genre, moving from conventional theatre and film to musical. Becoming a musical granted Tevye a new medium in which to connect to his audience, song. It is through songs and introductions to songs that Tevye was able to reclaim his place as the narrator of his stories. From the first song, “Tradition,” Tevye breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to his audience, something he hadn’t

done since the pages of Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman*. However, Tevye's connection with the crowd in *Fiddler* is very different than with Sholem Aleichem. The musical had him become an explainer, a guide through the world of Eastern European Jewry. The musical begins with Tevye saying "...here, in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof...and how do we keep our balance...tradition!" (*Fiddler*, 1971). Here, Tevye is introducing the mythical Eastern European shtetl to American Jews and gentiles alike. The musical genre, with Tevye as the narrator and teacher, allowed *Fiddler* to "integrate the contemporary concerns of Jewish-Americans with those of the general-American population by using Yiddish cultural matter shaped into an American genre" (Wolitz, 1988).

Fiddler on the Roof appealed to its audience through a variety of adaptations from previous versions. Most importantly, the musical was in English, and could capture the post-Holocaust generation of Jewish Americans, along with the children and grandchildren of earlier immigrants. A particularly interesting adaptation was of the setting. Tevye no longer lived in the countryside, as he did in *Tevye the Dairyman*, instead he and his family live in a *shtetl*. Jews were much more likely to live in *shtetlakh* than in the countryside, so *Fiddler* "removed the 'anomaly' of Tevye as a country Jew" (Wolitz, 1988). This adaptation was part of a project to "create a unified 'mythic' past" for American Jews, reducing the complexity of Eastern European Jewish history. The shift in message is clear in each of the three marriage plots, with all of them breaking apart the role of Tevye as the patriarch of the family (Wolitz, 1988). While in *Tevye the Dairyman*, these events "unravel Tevye's world," in the musical they are treated as "the natural evolution of Jewish Tradition" (Wolitz, 1988). Even though the

major plot elements are not changed, and many of the characters are not significantly adapted, *Fiddler* is no longer interested in the conflicts of the *shtetl* which were so central to Sholem Aleichem's political analysis of his time. *Fiddler* is instead positing that "Jewish adaptability [is the] key to Jewish continuity," and spreading that message to an audience of American Jews whose lives are "characterized by rapid upward mobility, assimilation and its threats to the community as well as the dawning realization of the devastation of the Holocaust" (Wolitz, 1988). This new message has little room for the argumentative splintering pre-WWII Jewish life. *Fiddler* was congratulating and encouraging the Americanness of its audience by legitimizing their adaptation to a new world as the only path forward for Judaism. The final scenes show an adapted ending: Tevye and his family on their way to America, and not the Land of Israel.

In conclusion, the Tevye storyworld has been through many iterations, stressing very different messages. Tevye has been adapted from Sholem Aleichem's stories, which deeply engaged with the chasms between Jews and their neighbours, and between Jewish parents and their children, to *Fiddler on the Roof* and its celebration of Americanness. Between those two versions, Tevye served as a hero of the Yiddish theatre, and a warning on the eve of the Holocaust. It is only by rejecting fidelity criticism and looking at adaptations of elements of the storyworld, such as the removal of the Sholem Aleichem character, the introduction of antisemitic Ukrainian gentiles, or the move from countryside to *shtetl*, that one can determine how the messaging of different Tevyes could change so much. As Tevye remains a recognizable character in the modern Jewish story, it is exciting to envision how he might be adapted next.

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